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Covert Research

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The purpose of this entry is to explore the long-standing controversy surrounding deception, secrecy, and ethical transgression, which often make up covert research. This is done in a threefold manner. After some reflections on what is meant by covert research, the covert diaspora is explored chronologically. Finally, the conclusion considers the potential revival of this position.

What Is Covert Research?

Covert research is equated with deliberate deception. In his well-quoted paper, Erickson equates covert research with “disguised observation” and “deliberate misrepresentation” and critically comments that it “represents a significant ethical problem in the field of sociology” (1967, p. 366). Although rather dated, this view accurately represents the received tone of much of the debate around covert research for a lengthy period of time. Roger Homan’s popular list of objections against covert research in his “The Ethics of Social Research” (1980) continued in the same vein. More recently, Thomas Roulet and colleagues elegantly argue that: “covert participant observation can enable researchers to gain access to communities or organizations and to collect knowledge that would otherwise remain unavailable” (2017, p. 512).

Covert research is methodologically frowned upon and effectively demonized as a “last resort methodology” (Calvey, 2017). By using covert research, one enters into an ethical labyrinth for both the researcher and the researched around moral dilemmas, whistle-blowing, partisanship, going native, physical risk and danger, emotional well-being, harm, intrusion, credibility, reputation, guilt syndromes, and deviant knowledge.

Despite the growing dissident literature on the situated complexity of informed consent, the use of covert research still trespasses and violates the orthodoxy of seeking informed consent, which is the standard mantra, with attached ceremonial status, in conducting social research. This orthodoxy is institutionalized in the codes, statements, and obligations of various professional bodies and associations across the social and human science community.

Covert research can thus be submerged and marginalized, particularly in the current climate which has seen a rise in ethical regimentation. Such regimentation, particularly in quasi-medicalized forms, can be disconnected from fieldwork realities. Therein, covert research is “epistemological exotica” and the “methodological pariah” in need of ethical regulation and monitoring. This is a restrictive, limiting, and crude view of covert research. The clear irony here is that many covert studies have creatively invigorated the social sciences.

The image of covert research is also intimately bound up with evocative popular cultural conceptions drawn from filmic versions of practitioner undercover work, mainly the police, detectives, and security industries, and populist investigative journalism involving celebrity stings and sensationalist topics. This blurs and conflates the definition between different forms of covert research and presents it typically within a heroic idiom, which overly romanticizes the field.

The Covert Diaspora in Social Research

There is a wide and dispersed range of studies and topics in the covert diaspora. On further granulation, many of these covert studies are rarely purist and employ more mixed strategies such as gatekeeping and key informants. Some studies, moreover, involve more unwitting types of concealment and thus contain covert elements rather than being designed deceptively. The diaspora then is more akin to a continuum rather than a fixed state of deception. The studies, from different eras, are drawn from various fields across the social and human sciences, including anthropology, investigative journalism, psychology, and sociology.

Some of studies in the diaspora are what can be termed the “usual suspects” ([Calvey, 2017](#)), which conventionally frame the field and often have ongoing scholarship about them, whilst others are less popular but instructive gems. Because the field of covert research is not incremental, integrated, or cross-fertilized, some of the studies have a rather stand-alone status in their respective fields.

[Nellie Bly \(1887\)](#), an investigative journalist, became an inspirational icon for feminists, with her courageous and early covert study of a women’s lunatic asylum in New York that was detailed in *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. She revealed the brutalization of inmates, which resulted in police investigations and legal reform. Paul Cressey, from the University of Chicago’s famous Department of Sociology, wrote *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1932) after longitudinal materials on taxi-dance halls were gathered over a 5-year period from a team of covert investigators, acting as “anonymous strangers.” This was a pioneering early study of the commercialization of sex work, which influenced future scholars researching this deviant world.

The work of Leon Festinger and colleagues within social psychology was seminal in the study of religious cults, particularly the application of cognitive dissonance in the management of individual and group delusion. [Festinger and colleagues \(1956\)](#) did not use gatekeeping arrangements and used a team of trained researchers, including the authors, posing as “ordinary members” during their work in publishing *When Prophecy Fails*. [Melville Dalton’s \(1959\)](#) underutilized work on management and bureaucracy in *Men Who Manage: Fusions of Feeling and Theory in Administration* is very distinctive in the length of time he spent in a sustained covert role, which was around a decade gathering rich longitudinal organizational data.

Erving Goffman’s iconic book *Asylums* (1961) was to have a major influence on the social science community, including healthcare fields and the antipsychiatry movement. Goffman spent a year doing fieldwork in the mid-1950s in this gatekeeping commissioned piece of covert ethnography, which radically put the patient perspective at the heart of the analysis. Despite the recognized methodological glosses, his study cogently explores “the mortification of self” within a total institution.

Laud Humphreys’s *Tearoom Trade* (1970) is an infamous landmark study found in most ethics handbooks. The semicovert study was based on his sociology doctoral thesis and analysed “the social structure of impersonal sex” (p. 14), which was a criminal act of sexual deviance at the time in the United States. The covert stages included his participation observation as a voyeuristic “watch queen” and transgressive

fake health researcher doing home interviews, followed by the less well-known overt interview data with his “intensive dozen” of key informants. Humphreys was very protective of the anonymity of his subjects and went through well-documented personal and professional trauma. His work was to have a seminal impact on sexuality studies.

James Patrick, a fictitious name, provides a rich covert participant observation account of a juvenile gang in Glasgow over 4 months in the mid-1960s in *A Glasgow Gang Observed* (1973). His account of brutality and violence, alongside camaraderie and fictive kinship, became a “go to” study of juvenile delinquency. The (David) Rosenhan experiment (1973) was a very influential covert pseudopatient study, which had a considerable impact on the growing antipsychiatric movement. The field experiment consisted of eight subjects, including Rosenhan of Stanford University, feigning the same mental health problem in order to gain admission to different psychiatric hospitals. The majority were wrongly diagnosed, gained admission, and were quickly given medication.

Another famous exemplar was Stanley Milgram’s work in social psychology and his obedience to authority experiments, often popularly characterized as the pain or torture experiments, which reached a broad audience both inside and outside academia. The electric shock experiments were undertaken at Yale University in the 1960s and repeated with 18 different variations, before being collected in *Obedience to Authority* (1974). The Holocaust provides the wider political and rather emotive backdrop to his work. Milgram also directly influenced the controversial Stanford Prison Experiment associated with Philip Zimbardo and colleagues and the less well-known semicovert (Charles) Hofling Hospital Experiment.

Working within the controversial pseudopatient tradition is R. W. Buckingham and colleagues’ (1976) provocative and underutilized *Living with the Dying* article. This study was conducted by medical anthropologists who, with careful gatekeeping, used covert participation observation to explore the culture of treating terminal cancer patients in a hospital in Montreal, Canada. Despite being only 9 days long, this was a very intense form of passing, with Buckingham becoming a patient on the ward and his academic colleague his faked cousin. They humanely argued that such vulnerable groups need well-resourced and specialized palliative care.

Calvey’s covert work (2000) explores bouncers in the night-time economy of Manchester. His 6-month covert study explored fictive kinship, choreographed bravado, violence, and hypermasculinity in the subculture of bouncers. His study was of a purist type and involved no gatekeeping, key informants, or retrospective debriefing. His study challenged the popular demonization of bouncers. Katherine Frank’s cultural anthropological work, *G-Strings and Sympathy* (2002), which formed the basis of her doctorate on erotic dancing, includes 6 years’ intermittent work as a nude entertainer with five different strip clubs in the United States. Her covert first-hand insider experience, combined with interview data from regular patrons and dancers, covers male desire, sexual fantasy, and counterfeit intimacy. Her work has a landmark status within the field, particularly in providing the male consumer perspective.

[Nancy Scheper-Hughes \(2004\)](#), a medical anthropologist, conducted a controversial study of organ

trafficking, which was to have a significant impact on policy and resulted in both international media coverage and criminal prosecutions. She took on several faked roles, including an organ buyer, in what she describes as an “undercover ethnography” to access and collect sensitive information. Her politicized approach was a form of “militant anthropology” and “enraged ethnography”.

[Pearson \(2009\)](#) researched the extreme and mythic subculture of football hooliganism covertly for a number of years. Pearson successfully passed as a proxy hooligan, which involved him in a sustained legal tightrope, in order to debunk some of stereotypical thinking and moral panics that informed the policing of and legislation around football fans. Pearson’s immersion into the habitus of the hooligan involved him in the mimicry of illicit rites and rituals, in order to understand the social logic of this subculture. [Julie Scott-Jones \(2010\)](#) covertly passed as an overseas “seeker” with God’s Way, a small group of isolated apocalyptic fundamentalist Christians in the United States, as part of her doctorate in social anthropology that was published in *Being the Chosen*. She explored how extreme lifeworld views can be rationalized in a modern society. The study of secretive cults and organizations seems very appropriate for covert study. Covert study offers a means to get insider knowledge in often challenging circumstances, although the risks and dangers of such immersion in altered states and extremist value systems and beliefs must be borne in mind.

A Revival of Sorts in Covert Research

There has been a revival of sorts in covert research, although it is likely to remain a relatively niche position. This revival, in part, comes from the rise of autoethnography and cyber ethnography. Clearly, these types of ethnography are not a species of covert research but a significant amount of them have covert dimensions, witting and unwitting. They both have, in different ways, obviated the issue of deception and the associated ethical dilemmas.

Despite the valid concerns with a narcissistic turn, autoethnography is typically justified from a personal experiential standpoint and can contain some covert elements. Cyber ethnography, in the form of online lurking, is typically justified by being nonintrusive, nonparticipatory, and dealing with public domain data. Consequently, concerns about specific Internet ethics and protocols are emerging. These two ethnographic growth areas are complex and dispersed fields in themselves, with a variety of different styles and modes being adopted. A diverse range of sensitive topics has been explored by both methods, which ironically would have been very problematic to conduct by even traditional overt participant observation.

The age-old question of do the means justify the ends remains. This debate often trades on an ideal-type view of informed consent, which in reality can be partial, messy, and complex. The debate also trades on an inflated and exaggerated view of the potential harm, risk, and danger of covert research. On much closer and fine-grained inspection of the covert diaspora, the majority of covert studies are rarely purist and often have gatekeeping arrangements and key informants. The alarmist response is based on a caricatured picture of covert research as cavalier. What Calvey has termed the heroic view ([Calvey, 2017](#)). Covert research thus becomes a convenient “chimera” from those ethicists who quickly and strictly oppose it in any format, even if

it could be used in a complementary way as part of a mixed or multiple methods approach. Covert work can then be stifled and, as a consequence, does not have a fair reading, perception, or treatment in academia. Covert work can be justified, if required, by providing a different type of insider insight. That is not to say that covert research can be zealously seen as a panacea. It is one choice amongst several in the methodological toolkit. Clearly, sensitivities around vulnerable groups and legal limitations must be sensibly geared into, but covert work is routinely underutilized and could push the analytic envelope further. Put simply, researchers are potentially missing a trick.

There is a limited dedicated literature on covert research, but much more rehabilitation work still needs to be done. Covert researchers have not crudely lost all ethicality, gone native, and taken a side in a belligerent “anything goes” manner in choosing to undertake covert research in the first place. Often nuanced ethical self-regulation is used by covert researchers in different settings. The doing of applied ethics then becomes a situated matter. Namely, the management of emergent “here and now” ethical dilemmas, which are not resolved but typically satisfied in the research setting. Fieldwork realities, and particularly covert versions, are disconnected from the policy and principle statements and visions of ethical review boards and committees. In the current climate of corporate branding, reputation management, and ethics creep, universities have become generally much more risk averse, with covert research being ultimately avoided and stifled under such regimes. Ethical review boards and committees do have a robust role to play but not in a “one size fits all” blanket way. What [Martyn Hammersley \(2010\)](#) cogently describes as creeping ethical regulation and the strangling of research.

Covert research has different sensibilities around narratives and fieldwork immersion and can significantly enhance the understanding of various topics in society, particularly controversial and illicit ones. Covert research, although not to everyone's conceptual taste nor appropriate for some settings, could become a more standard part of the ethnographic imagination. Ethnography is a craft ([Atkinson, 2015](#)), and for some scholars covert work can comfortably be seen as part of that craft. Covert research will no doubt remain the methodological pariah to many, but such pariahs can be necessary, instructive, insightful, and useful.

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